The Necessary Conditions for Promoting Environmental Education in Japan: Furthering the Spread of ESD

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In recent years, Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) has been actively promoted both in Japan and overseas. To help realize a sustainable society, this new approach broadens the scope of environmental education to encompass sociopolitical and socioeconomic areas not explicitly included until now, such as democracy, human rights, peace, poverty, and health. The growing adoption of ESD points to an international recognition and consensus that environmental problems cannot be solved unless environmental education addresses these social issues, and that solving environmental problems is essential to achieving a sustainable society.

In practice, however, ESD has yet to become well known in Japan. In this study, I examine what is needed to further Japanese environmental education, given its origins in education about pollution and nature conservation and the current lack of familiarity with ESD. Specifically, I review the history of Japanese education in this field, including education about pollution and nature conservation, together with the background to ESD both in Japan and overseas, and I discuss, among other points, the course of action necessary to spread ESD and the proper scope of education about pollution and nature conservation.

The study found that education about pollution and education for nature conservation both arose from grassroots movements, and that, in essence, they have in common the perspective of seeking the ideal form of our existing society, a viewpoint they also share with ESD. The study further showed, however, that the programs that have constituted environmental education in Japan in the past have not shared this perspective.

As a result, I identified two necessary conditions for promoting environmental education in Japan. First, it should be grounded in education about pollution and for nature conservation—specifically, in the socially critical perspective that these programs share with ESD, that is, the perspective of seeking the ideal form of our existing society.

Second, the antipollution and nature conservation movements can be categorized as citizens’ movements, and the educational activities to which they gave rise can be seen as preparation for
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citizenship. As my study of ESD and its history shows, it, too, ultimately aims to prepare students for
citizenship. Thus, the second necessary condition is citizenship training.

To summarize, a look at the necessary conditions for promoting environmental education in Japan
shows that the citizen is the key to problem-solving with a socially critical perspective. Accordingly,
ESD in Japan should aim to provide citizens with a socially critical perspective and to empower them
in order to achieve the fundamental changes in modern society that are its goal.